

the **OVERWEIGHT** agitator

AL SHARPTON
threatens
to sit on
racism



Picture European males' alleged choke-hold on American justice as a rigid phalanx of white bowling pins and Reverend Al Sharpton as a big black ball seeking to flatten them. Now, I don't care if Al makes a strike, a spare, or lands in the gutter—I just enjoy watching him roll down that lane.

Whatever your stand on race relations, it's hard to deny that the lovable windbag is one of the most entertaining political figures in many a moon. The elephantine evangelist is Ronald McDonald as a racial agitator, James Brown if he had swallowed The Famous Flames. With his processed hair, tent-sized jogging suit, and general blowzy grandiloquence, Al's his own caricature. I'd hug him, but I don't think my arms are long enough.

His naysayers have called him a "race hustler," a "hate huckster," a "racial ambulance chaser," and "a piranha who feeds on human misery." They say he aggravates isolated racial incidents into widespread ethnic animosity. Al admits that he's a "social headache" who "challenges people's comfort levels." With a rhino's tenacity, he flings shit-storms of mud back at his enemies, freely spouting such epithets as "faggot," "cracker," "fascist," and "recycled white trash." He makes wild, unsubstantiated accusations about their sexuality or their evolutionary status relative to dogs. Few people can rub it in your face like Big Al. He really knows how to goad 'em.

In New York, Al leads the press corps around on a leash. Huffing and puffing, chanting and whooping, marching and picketing, fasting and screaming, he has elbowed his way into the limelight. In any case which bears the slightest whiff of racism, Al's there, sniffing a snoutful. He's been a key player in such racially charged affairs as the Howard Beach incident, where a black man was struck dead by a car as he fled from a group of bat-swinging whites; the Tawana Brawley matter, involving a teenaged black girl allegedly gang-raped and smeared with dog shit by white cops during a four-day hate marathon (a jury found the charges to be fraudulent); the Crown Heights incident, in which a black youth was accidentally killed by a Jewish driver, setting off days of rioting; the Central Park jogger case, concerning a pack of young black males on a "wilding" spree who raped and bludgeoned a white woman into a coma (Al sort of sided with the black kids on that one); and the slaying of Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager who came to the Guido-thick Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst to buy a used car but was mistaken as a local girl's lover and shot to death. The last case received the most national exposure, due primarily to Al's high-profile protest marches through the hostile Italian 'hood. An irate Bensonhurstian went so far as to stab Al prior to one of the demonstrations, ensuring even bigger headlines. Al claimed that his life was saved by his protective layer of blubber.

He has also emerged smelling like a three-hundred-pound rose from governmental attempts to discredit him through alleged tax-dodging and mob ties. Al keeps the ball rolling, fighting the fight he began thirty-four years ago when he first ascended a pulpit at age four. He's so goddamned busy, it took two-and-a-half months and more than a hundred calls to his Brooklyn office to finally get through to him, and the phones kept ringing in the background as we spoke. Despite all his gassy bombast, Al Sharpton has his fans, and you can count me among them. When it comes to political figures, we need fewer zombies and more clowns.

What would you say is the biggest problem facing America, and how would you fix it?

Well, I think the biggest problem is the distribution of wealth. I think the fact that the country is facing a huge deficit and [that] for the last twelve years, the presidents that have been in the White House—both Reagan and Bush—and the Congress have chosen to balance the budget off the backs of the poor and the urban areas, while they have given almost a license to steal to the wealthy, is the biggest problem facing the

country. I would support the Rainbow Plan of investing pension funds into urban areas, as well as the plan of cutting the military budget by fifty percent and reinvesting in the country rather than the continual use of the sacred cow of the military, as well as the continuation of giving little or no tax to those major corporations, multinational corporations, and the wealthy. I think [that] until we can deal with the question of redistribution of wealth, we will not solve a lot of the problems in this country.

OK. Growing up in Brooklyn, what was your first taste of racism, and how did that affect you?

Well, the first taste I had of racism was when I was around three. I rode with my mother and father to Florida and saw the "FOR WHITES ONLY" signs in front of motels and in front of various eating places, and I could not believe that because we were black we could not eat or use certain public facilities. [He could read at age three?]

How are you able to attract so much attention?

Well, I think that any effective activist knows how to dramatize their causes, and I grew up in the movement, I was from thirteen years old [the Youth Director of S.C.L.C. [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]



here, and the greatest dramatist of this century was Martin Luther King. And he did it by mass protest, he did it by civil disobedience. I also worked directly under Reverend [Jesse] Jackson, who was good at that. I was raised by James Brown, who certainly knew how to promote himself. So, to be in King's movement, under Jesse Jackson, [and] workin' with James Brown and not be able to know how to focus attention would have made me retarded.

How do you respond to people who say that you're a racist?

Well, I would say that they would have to give some evidence. The fact of the matter is that I have never fought against any race of people. I have fought for people that were victimized, including whites. And I think that there are those who try to label people because they don't want to deal with the issues. To fight for black kids being killed in Howard Beach or Bensonhurst, or fighting against police brutality, does not make one racist. I am not going out and saying [one should] kill any people—whites or Italians or Jews, anybody—I'm saying to stop killing people of color. And there's certainly nothing racist about that. The fact of the matter is, when I ran for the US Senate here last year, twenty-five percent of my votes came from other than black people. So I don't think a lot of people believe that. I think that is said by those that don't want to deal with the issues I raise.

OK, there was a *New York Times* survey where I think it was, like, one percent of white people had a positive impression of you.

Well, that was six years ago. I think if you read *The New York Times Magazine* last week, they admitted that I got, again, twenty-five percent of my votes came from whites. I mean, we could use old polls, or we could talk about what is the perception now.

Do you own a gun, and under what circumstances would you use it?

I do not own any type of weapon—gun, knife, or anything. I'm totally committed to the nonviolent movement.

Are you for gun control?

I'm *absolutely* for gun control. As one that was victimized by a knife, I certainly feel that we've got to be careful [about] what type of weapons are at large in society.

That's something interesting—you seemed really forgiving toward that guy who stabbed you in Bensonhurst.

Because I think that he is as much a victim of society as I am. I think that he, given the sociology of the community he lived in, given the media bent, felt that I was against him, [that] I was a threat to him, and not realizing that all I'm fighting for is the freedom to express myself and have no limits in society. So I felt that to penalize him without understanding that he had a mindset that society had put there—just like



society had rendered unfairness to me—would have been hypocritical. That's why I stood and said what I said at his sentencing, because the criminal-justice system was just as guilty as he was, as far as I was concerned.

Besides [stabbing you], what were some of the more extreme things local residents did when you marched through the predominantly white areas of Bensonhurst and Canarsie?

Well, they threw watermelons at us, they threw urine at us. Probably the most memorable thing was, there was a wedding going on, and the bride and groom and the whole wedding party came out of their wedding to heckle and call us niggers in the middle of their wedding. I mean, I was absolutely astounded by that, and I think that what we did was what [Martin Luther] King did in the South, which is probably why we became very controversial here, is we were able to put on the evening news northern New York

racism. Before that, there were people questioning whether we were exaggerating, whether we were hallucinating. After Bensonhurst, no one at least could question the fact that there was a racist element in New York. The question then was how to *deal* with it. So if nothing else, they have to give us credit for exposing the hidden racism in the North.

Do you think the climate in Bensonhurst has improved any in the time that's passed?

I think to a degree it has. I think that there has been efforts by people on both sides. Norman Siegel, who's the head of the New York [chapter of the American] Civil Liberties Union, and others [are trying to] bring harmony and bring racial relations together. But I think ultimately, the criminal-justice system is the one that's gonna have to make it clear that even if people don't learn to love each other that they're not gonna be permitted to abuse each other.

What sort of things make you happy?

I love reading. I love eating. [Laughs]

What kind of things do you like to eat?

Fried chicken. I'm a soul-food connoisseur. And I like reading.

What kind of things do you read?

Well, all nonfiction. I don't read a lot of fiction at all. But I like to spend my time in airplanes or in hotels when I'm on the road doing a lot of reading. I don't go to the movies a lot. I like the theater, but I don't really have a lot of time for it. But I would basically say reading and eating is my two habits.

What sort of things really get under your skin?

When people assume things without really carefully understanding what I'm trying to say. When you have to deal with stereotypes. And I'm not talkin' racial, but I'm talkin' about political stereotypes, rather than people trying to deal with the issues at hand. That bothers me. And I think any form of emotional disrespect, even among those that support me, I think that they should respect and hear what others have to say, because I think that it's the ultimate sign of ignorance to just jump into a situation and not regard the feelings of the people on the other side.

Alright. Here's a question everybody wants to know [the answer to]—how do you get your hair that way?

[Laughs] I go to a hair stylist once a week. James Brown's the first one that got me to do it, and I've had it like this for twelve years, and I told him I would keep it like that until he died, 'cause he and I are the only ones that still do this kind of styling. Or that I know of, anyway. ■



